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Theology

Marcus Pound

Theology played a marginal role in Žižek's early work; only later does he self-consciously identify his work as theology – albeit a 'materialist theology' – whilst presenting a concerted critical analysis of Christianity in the light thereof.¹ The crux of his identification relates to the post-metaphysical turn in his work ('there is no big Other'), and accompanying materialist ontology.

Theology may seem an unlikely ally in this regard, all the more so given that Žižek identifies as an atheist. But Žižek joins an established chorus of theological objectors to the God of classical metaphysics (i.e. onto-theology) who was identified with the Greek philosophical category of 'Being'; i.e. that which can be univocally predicated of all beings. God came to be understood as the highest Being, the *causa sui* which sustains beings as a whole, and the transcendental place-holder which ensures the objectivity of objects (what Lacan calls the 'big Other').

Despite overtones of Heidegger, it is Hegel who serves as Žižek's principle theological guide. Hegel reads the cross in terms of kenosis, i.e. God's self-emptying: 'what dies on the cross is indeed God himself; not just his "finite container"², but the God of the beyond, i.e. the God of metaphysics. After this, 'Spirit' names the community of believers, the purely corporal body of the church; that is to say, the realization of the cross is the release it brings from transcendence, making it homologous to Hegel's 'night of the world'.

In Marxist terms the logic of kenosis signals an end to 'obfuscation and fetishization, and liberation into the inexplicable joy and suffering of the world.'³ So while Žižek takes seriously the Marxist notion that all criticism begins with the criticism of religion, his resultant claim is that theology, more specifically Christian theology, contains a subversive kernel of revolutionary praxis through its incarnational logic which releases Christianity into the world; and through which Marxism must pass.

Indeed, he goes as far as to suggest that theology offers the first critique of ideology in the biblical figure of Job.⁴ Faced with unending suffering, Job refuses the solace offered by the theologians who seek to give metaphysical meaning to his suffering (e.g. you suffer in this life because...); rather, he asserts the very meaninglessness of suffering to the extent that even God cannot explain it.

And because Žižek reads Job as the precursor to Christ,⁵ he is able to push the consequences of this logic a little further. Christ's cry of dereliction upon the cross is the point at which God faces up to his own powerlessness: God is an atheist.⁶

In this way Žižek is able to interpret Lacan's claim that 'The true formula of atheism is not "God is dead", but "God is unconscious"⁷': it is not enough to simply cease consciously believing in God; God has to stop believing in himself. Because God is identified with the symbolic order, one must neither believe in a big Other nor rely on a big Other who believes for me.

¹ For Žižek's major theological works see Žižek: *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (New York: Verso, 2000); *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*, (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2003); *On Belief*, (New York: Routledge, 2001); and J. Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, ed. C. Davis, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009); and B. Gunjevic, *God in Pain: Inversions of Apocalypse*, trans. by Ellen Elias-Bursac (Seven Stories Press, 2012).

² S. Žižek and J. Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, ed. C. Davis, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), p. 257.

³ Cyril O'Regan, 'Žižek's and Milbank and the Hegelian Death of God' in *Modern Theology* 26:2 April 2010 278–286, 283.

⁴ See Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*, (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2003), p. 124.

⁵ See Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*, (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2003), p. 122.

⁶ See Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*, (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2003), p. 14.

⁷ Žižek and J. Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, ed. C. Davis, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), p. 297.

As Adam Kotsko has noted, Žižek's approach sits neatly with Protestant 'Death-of-God' theology.⁸ But it is important to highlight that unlike his theological counterparts Žižek does not take the death-of-God as an event which opens the field for the 'reassertion of the true abyss of Divinity as a spectral promise.'⁹ Rather, what dies is the 'very structuring principle of our entire universe'; this is the 'properly apocalyptic shattering power'¹⁰ named in the event of Christ: the cry of dereliction. Gone then is any notion that theological reason entertains 'a closed circuit of harmonious and balanced exchange between God and his creation', which Žižek identifies with paganism rather than Christianity. That being the case, the 'divine incarnation' would lose its traumatic character as the 'radical antagonism at the very heart of divinity',¹¹ the inconceivable event that opens up and sustains the temporal order.

Nor does Žižek endorse the post-secular 'messianic' turn within deconstruction. Derrida turns messianic hope into the expectation of the arrival of a spectral 'Other' which is nonetheless endlessly deferred. In contrast, Žižek assumes the more radical claim that the Messiah has already come, and so faith in the event offers a more genuine form of openness: not simply that of undecidability but that of living in the wake of the Event and drawing out its consequences through fidelity to the Event as such. Faith names then a commitment to the real of the Event of Christ, an Event which found no place within the existing symbolic order but which invited an attempt to rethink the social order in such a way as to include others also dispossessed by the symbolic.

Žižek's theology thus contains a paradoxical tension: his Christology appears both orthodox - Christ must actually be God to push the consequences of the logic to its extreme - and radically exemplarist - God's kenotic outpouring amounts to the subjective task, i.e. emptying the subject of the illusion of a substantial self.

In terms of its orthodoxy, Žižek adheres to the Joachimite schematization adopted by Hegel as the basis of his Christian genealogy, according to which Christianity self-differentiates itself over time such that early Christianity - which emphasised the role of the Father - develops through medieval form - which gives primacy to the Son - to arrive at a modern Protestant form of Christianity in which the principle meaning of God's Sonship is definitively disclosed as Spirit; at which point it becomes merely exemplary: what matters now is not the person of Christ, but the meaning given to Christ in the spirit of the community.

Similarly, the incarnation becomes for Žižek the model for the subjective task i.e. the destitution of the self. This then also the interpretative basis for re-reading Christian agape: 'The death of God, the secularization of modern Europe, clears the slate by obliterating the moral metaphysical God of onto-theology, and thus paradoxically opens up the space for the new authentic post-metaphysical religion, a Christianity focused on Agape.'¹²

So while Žižek highlights the perverse forms of logic employed by Christianity to avoid the non-existence of the big Other, he also maintains its revolutionary and subversive potential in regard of the big Other, and in this way develops a theological approach in which theism appears to coincide with atheism. Hence, Žižek says, 'Theists no longer despise atheists [...] the god-less thinking which must abandon the god of philosophy... is ... perhaps closer to the divine god. More open to Him than metaphysics would like to admit. Not only do atheists pray, but how, today, it is perhaps only atheists who truly pray.'¹³

In *The Parallax View*, Žižek offers what he calls 'building blocks for a materialist theology.' While the 'materialist' element recalls the Marxist inversion of Hegel, Žižek also brings an ontological dimension to bear on the question, drawing upon Lacan's notion of the non-all. His concern is not to expunge transcendence from materialism so as to reduce life to its 'inert material

⁸ Adam Kotsko, *Žižek and Theology*, (USA: T & T Clark, 2008), pp. 149-155.

⁹ Žižek and J. Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, ed. C. Davis, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), p. 260.

¹⁰ Žižek and J. Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, ed. C. Davis, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), p. 260.

¹¹ Žižek and J. Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, ed. C. Davis, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), p. 253.

¹² Žižek, and J. Milbank *The Monstrosity of Christ*, ed. C. Davis (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), p. 255.

¹³ Žižek, *The Parallax View*, (Massachusetts & London: MIT Press, 2006), p. 103.

density,¹⁴ rather he argues that material reality is itself incomplete (non-all) to the extent that it presupposes a void.

In Žižek's metapsychology, the constitutive void which maintains materiality as non-all is the mark of the inherent and excessive core from which humanity springs,¹⁵ the spark of divinity and the means by which we identify with God's impotence.

Hence Žižek's atheism is not simply a reductive disbelief in God, but a more positive form of unbelief, so that unlike a negative theology which presupposes nonetheless the prior positivity of God, Žižek's 'negation of the negation' offers a negative theology of the void.

To take the Eucharist as an example: where Freud claimed it was a revival of the ancient totemic meal which sought to atone for the initial parricide; Žižek's point is that it pertains to the ontological status of the non-all, the 'undead' which evokes Christ's death, not in terms of the negation of his life, but the negative excess which makes for subjectivity, and from which the church/collective springs.¹⁶

Žižek's theology remains close to theologians like Kierkegaard for whom religion (the real) is higher than ethics (the symbolic), and for whom God is 'strictly correlative to the ontological openness of reality, to our relating to reality as unfinished [...] God is beyond the order of Being, he is nothing but the mode of how we relate to him.'¹⁷

Arguably the attraction of the Žižek's theological atheism is that while he embraces the incompleteness of materiality, and hence of love and knowledge, his claim that Holy Spirit arises out of that Gap (the constitutive void) and serves to bind community, echoes in ways indebted to Alain Badiou a militant reading of Saint Paul. So while his work is largely critical of Christianity, he also develops a theological reading which proposes the mutual form both Christianity and politics must take if they are to survive.

¹⁴ Žižek, and J. Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, ed. C. Davis, The MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 2009, p. 92.

¹⁵ Žižek, *The Parallax View*, (Massachusetts & London: MIT Press, 2006), p. 22.

¹⁶ Žižek, 'Neighbors and Other Monsters', in *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries into Political Theology*, edited by Žižek, Slavoj; Santer, Eric L.; Reinhard, Kenneth, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 173.

¹⁷ S. Žižek, *The Parallax View*, (Massachusetts & London: MIT Press, 2006), p. 79.